

Diocese of Westminster

Safe and Good Practice Regarding the Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in Schools & Colleges

1. Introduction

1. These guidelines are to help staff and priests in organising the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (also known as confession) in schools and colleges, including sixth form colleges, in the Diocese of Westminster.
2. The guidelines are to address two issues concerning the Sacrament of Reconciliation:
 - a. the appropriate manner and place of the celebration;
 - b. the question of confidentiality.
3. The endnotes expand the points made and give additional information.

2. The Appropriate Manner and Place of the Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in Schools and Colleges

1. Whenever the Sacrament of Reconciliation is celebrated in schools and colleges care should be taken to ensure that:
 - a. Priests coming to hear confessions are known to be in good standing with the Diocese - each priest will have documentation to demonstrate this, such as a celebret or testimonial of suitability, and any need for verification can be followed up with the local Dean.
 - b. No confined or isolated places are used;
 - c. Any rooms where confessions are heard have windows and doors with transparent panels;
 - d. Staff are present to manage the logistical organisation;
 - e. There is a suitable exit route should the priest or penitent (the person making their confession) need to leave because of any kind of emergency;

- f. The priest wears a stole when hearing confessions to signify this is a sacramental celebration distinct from other types of meeting and conversation;
 - g. The priest is aware of the name and means of contact of the designated safeguarding officer in the particular school or college.
2. Good practice seeks to enable the Sacrament of Reconciliation to be celebrated in schools and colleges in clear view of others, although at a sufficient distance so that nothing can be heard of the conversation between the priest and the penitent. This is often best facilitated by a priest, or a number of priests, hearing confessions in a larger open space such as a school hall.¹

3. The Question of Confidentiality and the Sacrament of Reconciliation

1. Whatever a person says to a priest in the context of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is absolutely confidential. This form of absolute confidentiality is referred to as the seal of confession. It means the priest can never reveal, under any circumstances, what he has heard during a confession.
2. The seal of confession should be distinguished from other forms of professional confidentiality and from any information shared with a priest outside of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.²
3. There may be occasions when the obligation to maintain professional confidentiality is suspended or overruled, for example in the case of the disclosure of abuse. The absolute confidentiality of seal of confession, however, applies at all times and in all places where the Sacrament of Reconciliation is received and celebrated.³
4. Every priest visiting a school or college to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation is bound by the seal of confession. This means that he cannot pass on to another person any information he has received, including any disclosure of abuse. If a disclosure of abuse is made during the Sacrament of Reconciliation, this must be taken very seriously.⁴ The priest would encourage and support anyone making a safeguarding disclosure to take this to the school or college's designated safeguarding officer.

5. It is important that every individual celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation has a distinct beginning and end so that both the priest and the penitent are clear about what is covered by the seal of confession. The unique status of the seal of confession should be explained to pupils and they should be made aware that there is no absolute confidentiality outside of this.
6. Any documentation a priest is asked to sign when visiting a school or college, relating to safeguarding procedures and practices, should take into account the complete confidentiality of the seal of confession. It should also recognise that such confidentiality only applies when the priest is hearing confessions.
7. Headteachers, staff, chaplains and governors should be aware of these considerations and seek to incorporate them in their provision for the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

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¹ The Procedures Manual of the Catholic Safeguarding Advisory Service states:

Principle - All children, young people and adults must be enabled to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation in a way which is both in accordance with the nature of Sacramental Confession and respects their right to enjoy the highest level of care, protection, love, encouragement and respect.

Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation - Children and young people should be able to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation in a way that is both in accordance with the nature of Sacramental Confession and offers protection to both themselves and the confessor. It must afford both protection and privacy.

A variety of means can be adopted to achieve this goal. These are:

- Use of the traditional confessional box where there is a fixed grill or a separate entrance for the Priest and penitent;
- An area where either the penitent or the priest is within sight, although not within hearing of others;
- Behind a "frosted" screen. It should be in a location where other adults are present although these adults should not be behind the screen with the penitent and the Priest. This will be required when a deaf child is celebrating the Sacrament so that their conversation cannot be observed.

When deciding which approach is adopted, consideration should be given to the child's needs, wishes and feelings; e.g. older children may wish to use a traditional confessional box as opposed to celebrating the sacrament face-to-face. The penitent is free to exercise his

or her personal choice. Whatever the choice, it must be in accordance with the principle of taking all reasonable steps to create a safe environment.

See: http://www.csasprocedures.uk.net/p_nat_pol_crea.html#sacrament (accessed 6 Feb 2018)

² For example, a priest may not reveal anything said to him by a penitent during a confession. However, the priest is obliged to report any disclosure of abuse which he gains knowledge about outside of a confession. Should anyone ask to speak to a priest outside of confession, and request absolute confidentiality, the priest should make it clear that this cannot be guaranteed and that he must report any safeguarding issues if he hears about them.

³ The nature of the seal of confession is addressed in the Code of Canon Law.

⁴ “The Sacrament of Reconciliation offers the penitent the seal of absolute confidentiality; in this context alone is the priest bound to keep secret what is disclosed. Knowledge of the information is for the priest, the penitent and God. Where there is involvement of an interpreter, e.g. during the Confession of a deaf person, a duty of complete confidentiality is extended to this person. Information gained in the context of the sacramental confession may not be used in any other forum. Disclosure of an incident of sexual abuse in the context of the sacramental confession is very rare but a priest must know what to do in these circumstances.”

Furthermore: “A priest must be clear with the penitent about the status of a conversation and ensure that there is no misunderstanding about whether the Seal of Confession applies.”

“A victim or survivor of abuse is not guilty of any sin in respect of the abuse suffered. In part, their healing relies on the recognition of this fact. Abusers will often tell their victims that they are to blame and that they will be punished if they tell of the abuse. The priest should help the victim/survivor to place the responsibility where it belongs, i.e. with the offender.

“Survivors and victims of abuse will usually need help. From within the context of the sacramental confession the priest can encourage the penitent to seek such help outside the sacrament. They should also be given encouragement to pass on the information to an appropriate person. It is not the priest's role to engage in counselling in the context of the sacramental confession, even if he is appropriately professionally qualified to do so, since this leads to a confusion of roles and might give rise to conflicts of interest for himself and the penitent.”

In addition: “If the priest is subsequently contacted by the penitent, outside of the Seal of the Confessional, the Priest must make it clear to the penitent that the Seal of Confession no longer applies. If the information is repeated (he should not assume knowledge gained in the confessional), the priest must explain that he has a responsibility to take all reasonable steps to protect children or adults who may be at risk of abuse.”

See: http://www.csasprocedures.uk.net/p_disclosure_abuse.html (accessed 6 Feb 2018)